

Chapter 1

Rule #1: Study Your Bible Prayerfully

Suppose you are a medical doctor. You have a practice that specializes in routine check ups for adults. A 17-year old girl comes in for a physical. You examine her and write up a report. Now suppose you are a high school counselor. A 17-year old girl comes in for a routine check-up as required by the school. You write a report and stick it in the file. Now suppose you are a 17-year year old boy in the same high school. (If you are a girl, reverse the sexes and it may help the illustration.) You are told you can write a report on any person you want, and you pick that same 17-year old girl. Once that boy gets the assignment, he discovers the girl is very good looking and he starts to develop a big-time crush on this girl. Now he realizes that the greatest joy in life is getting to write a report about her. "Is this a great world or what?" he says. Of the three reports on this girl: the medical doctors, the counselors or the boy-with-a-crush, which one is going to have the most personal details? Which one will have the most passion?

The reason I give this illustration is although the first two writers can write an objective report, it is the third report by which we can learn the most information about the girl. Let's compare that illustration to faith as Christians. What God the Father desires of us is a love-relationship. A healthy love relationship is first of all, based on a commitment. The emotional feelings follow. One can read the Bible like a doctor, a scientist or a counselor and write a report. That type of report may be interesting, but it is not the primary purpose that God desires for us as we read and study the Bible. God desires that love relationship. If you have that love for God, you are going to have that strong desire to read your bible. Not as to memorize the facts and figures, but to develop that love relationship between God and yourself. That love relationship should naturally spring forth a desire to want to learn more. Just as the 17 year old boy wants to learn as much as he can about the girl, so is your loving desire to want to learn more about God and what he expects of you.

The first rule of this book is, "Read Your Bible Prayerfully". I choose this rule first for a reason. Prayer, in its most basic form is communication with God. We are speaking to an entity far greater than us. It is a supernatural ability given by God to us in order to communicate with us. God, by definition is perfect. If God were less than perfect, then he would be capable of making mistakes. A perfect God knows all things. If God were capable of learning, he would not know all things. Therefore, a perfect God can also read your thoughts, as again, he knows all things. Since this perfect God knows your thoughts, prayer is for your benefit. Prayer is communication with God and prayer is to help you better understand how to live your life to serve God. The basic concept behind living the Christian life is that our primary function is not to give ourselves glory but to give God the glory for all that we do.

God wants an intimate relationship with you and he wants you to learn more about him. The means by which you grow in that relationship with him is through prayer and studying the Bible. These two ideas go hand in hand and are often meant to work together. Because of that concept, it is necessary to prayerfully read your bible as opposed to just reading your bible. Prayerfully reading your bible brings into focus that you are not reading a textbook, but a series of messages written outside of time for our learning. The primary purpose of praying before,

during or after one reads the Bible is to ask help in understanding what the text says. By praying some sort of prayer asking God to help you understand the text, you are giving God, and not yourself the credit for whatever you learn from your regular bible reading.

I have to admit I'm a bit hesitant to actually give you an example of how to pray before reading your bible. What I don't want is to say, "Here, memorize this sentence and use it every time". Whatever you pray needs to be from the heart and sincere. It is best to use your own words. I simply suggest that you ask God to help you comprehend what you are about to read. The prayer can be as simple and short as the last sentence. If there is something bothering you, ask God to help you to remove any distraction(s) and to help you focus more on him. Another alternative when you have some big issue on your mind is to ask God for insight in dealing with that situation. You are not only communicating with the creator of the universe who can read your thoughts, you are talking to a God who wants an intimate personal relationship. God wants to hear from you. A loving God is one who cares for you and wants the best for your life. The principals taught in the Bible teach what are God's expectations of us in our relationship with Him and with others. The purpose of prayer in bible study is to ask God's help to see what he wants you to learn.

The Bible as a book is God's answer to the question, "OK, God, I believe you exist. Now what do I do?" The Bible spends very little time and space arguing for the existence of God. That is the assumption of the book. The interesting thing is that once you spend regular time in the Bible, one can develop arguments for God's existence based on the evidence of the book itself. If you have doubts about God's existence, they can often be resolved by the studying the Bible as evidence of his existence.

At this point, it might be helpful to explain just what is Christianity. Christianity is not just saying, "I believe in Jesus", although that's a good start. Christianity is about telling God in effect "OK, you are now in charge of my life. I'm taking my marching orders from you". I realize that I can't please you on my own efforts and abilities. In order to have a relationship with you, first you have to believe that Jesus paid the price for all of my sins. From there, I desire to learn from you how to live my life as God desires, and not as I desire."

Becoming a Christian is as easy as praying a prayer as simple as that last paragraph. It doesn't have to be emotional, just sincere. If one makes that commitment to tell God that I believe Jesus is God, and since Jesus is a perfect God, I accept Him as the perfect sacrifice for my sins. Further, I am willing to let you take over my life and live to please you rather than pleasing myself. That is when God the Father takes over in your life. Christian maturity is about growing moment by moment in that trust that God is working in your life. You are now a construction project. All Christians need to walk around with big yellow signs saying "Caution, under construction". Because we are under construction, we are not yet perfect and have faults. Christianity is not about being perfect, it is about being forgiven. It is about growing in your trust in God to finish working on you. The Bible is the main way God communicates to us what he expects from us in that new relationship.

Prayer is a supernatural ability to communicate with God. The ability to comprehend the Bible requires a God-given ability. Each word and phrase of the Bible is God-inspired. Christians believe that the sixty-six books that compose the Bible (there are 14 more Old Testament Books

in the Roman Catholic Bible. Protestants do not believe these books are God-inspired) are all God inspired in the original autographs. We no longer have any of the original documents. We believe the copies we have today are either 100% accurate or 99.9% to a point where the differences that scholars debate about are so trivial, that they make no difference whatsoever in the principals taught in these books.

This leads us back to Rule #1 – Read Your Bible Prayerfully. I knew I'd get back there eventually. So, let me ask the question. Why should you read your bible prayerfully? Why shouldn't you just open up to your bookmark and pick up where you left off last time?

The first answer has to do with “supernatural comprehension”. One of the main functions of the Holy Spirit is to help you understand the Bible, and how to apply it to your life”. If you are not prayerfully reading your bible, you are trying to understand the Bible based on your own skill. Praying before one reads is to remember that God gets the glory for comprehending the Bible and not you. Remember that the purpose of living the Christian life is to give the glory to God. If we ask God to help us understand what we read, we are then asking God to be in charge, and not us.

The reason we pray is we want God involved in our understanding of the Bible. If we could “figure all things out by ourselves” and solve all issues by ourselves without God's help, then why would we want God's help? One of the big picture ideas to see in the Bible is the historical failure of man to please God on his own efforts. One of the great lessons of the Bible is man's failure to be able to please God without the help and support of God himself. An old biblical expression is “Without God, we can't. Without us, God won't”. It comes back to that love relationship that God desires for us. If we are just reading the Bible without communicating to God our need for understanding and comprehension, God won't help us to understand. A perfect God is perfect in love. God won't help you if you don't invite Him to help you. He loves you too much to violate your free-will choice to not invite Him into your reading.

Jesus said, “But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.” (John 14:26, NIV)

The Holy Spirit is one of the Trinity that works in the background. His main function is to bring glory to God the Father through people. This is accomplished in many ways. Part of his job is to convict people of their sins as to drive them to Jesus. Another function of the Holy Spirit is to teach and remind believers of the things the Bible has said so we can apply them as we live our lives. This statement by Jesus implies two things: First, we must learn “these things” to begin and second, the Holy Spirit will teach and remind us of what “these things” are once we learn them.

First, this calls for the reading and studying of Scripture. In cultures where the Bible is not readily available for public reading, it would mean listening to those who have access to Scripture, say a pastor, a priest or a missionary reading the Bible to you. If you live in a culture where the Bible is readily available, God expects you to read the Bible. Remember that God wants us to grow in maturity and faith in our belief. A perfect God will hold us accountable based on the amount of information readily available for us to us. If we live in a culture with

access to the printed bible, God expects us to take advantage of that readily accessed material for our growth.

This scripture also means that in order for the Holy Spirit to teach and remind us of “these things”, we have to learn “these things” in the first place. This quote by Jesus does not say, “Lie back in bed and I’ll have angels read it to you while you sleep!” It implies that we must learn the text and then the job of the Holy Spirit will teach and remind us of “these things” as the need arises.

Let’s get back to the verse by Jesus. He says in that verse “The Holy Spirit will teach us all things”. Did you ever stop and realize that this is a promise by Jesus? This is also a wonderful chance to put God to a test. Ever come to a verse where you are not sure what it means? Try a prayer something like this: “Father in heaven, the Bible says that the role of the Holy Spirit is to teach us all things. I don’t understand this verse, help, amen.” This is where the supernatural ability of God will often come into your life. God’s reputation is now on the line because He promised he would teach you all things and here is a “thing” you don’t comprehend. I am convinced by experience God answers those prayers because it is an opportunity to give the glory to God and not yourself. It is just another reason for Rule #1: Read Your Bible Prayerfully”. It doesn’t mean you have to stop and pray after every verse. In this particular situation, it does mean when you are stuck, you can pray for God’s guidance.

Something to remember about this principal is that you are working on God’s timing and not your own. One of the principals behind the idea of turning your life over to God is that He is in now in control of our timing and not us. A frustrating aspect of the Christian life is that we want God to work on our timetable and not His. To grow in maturity as a Christian is to learn to accept his timing. That principal also comes in the comprehension of God’s word. We ask God to help us understand. He will answer, as he promises, but we often have to wait on his timing as to best when to receive that answer. It may come the next time we read that passage. It may come by hearing something said from the pulpit or by Christian radio. Don’t worry about straining to try to hear that answer. God is more than capable of making sure you get that answer when He is good and ready to give you that answer.

When it comes to reading my bible prayerfully, I do believe it is important to simply site a short prayer prior to reading your bible. Remember that a perfect God knows all things. God isn’t standing over and you and saying, “Well now, you didn’t pray before you started. Too bad I can’t teach you anything today”. That is bad thinking. Prayer is for our benefit and not for God. Prayer before reading your bible is an effort by you to ask God to be involved in the comprehension of what is written in his word.

There are no magic words in bible reading and bible prayer. God is not standing there saying “Unless you pray with just the right words, I can’t help you today”. A perfect God loves you perfectly. He wants to have a relationship with you. He desires to communicate his principals and his expectations of us through the Bible. To prayerfully study your bible is to invite God in to your reading time. Pray in anyway you feel comfortable. If you are easily distracted, ask God to take away the distractions. If there is an important issue in your life, ask God to show you how his principals apply to that particular issue. Pray in a way that is comfortable to you. If God wants you to change your style of prayer, he will find a way to tell that to you. Through

the years, my style of prayer has changed as I have grown in my relationship with God. What works for me, is going to be different for what works for you.

My point is not to obsess over the style or the length of the prayer but to focus on the information you desire to communicate to God. You may also choose to interrupt your reading for additional prayer based on something you just learned. You may choose to do a closing prayer based on some principals you read. The whole purpose of reading your bible is to grow in your relationship with God. Prayer and reading God's word are designed to go hand-in-hand. That is why this is Rule #1.

A perfect God who is perfect in love desires to help you reflect that love back to him. A perfect God who is perfect in love desires to help you reflect that love to others. The Bible is his written material to communicate his desires and purpose for our lives. The rule studying your bible prayerfully is getting God directly involved in that communication.